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WHAT IS POETRY?

"Prose," said Coleridge, in conversation, "consists of words in their best order: poetry, of the *best* words in the best order."

This is high authority in any question of taste or criticism; but are not those words best, whether in prose or poetry, which are most to the purpose? Or is there any order better than that best fitted to produce the effect intended?

The same great critic speaks of poetry as a mode of composition in which the highest degree of attention is bestowed upon all the parts consistent with the requisite degree of attention to the whole. This definition will bear study: but it seems rather to describe a *poem* than to define poetry; and the *form* of a poem than its substance. The question would still be, what spirit forms this elaborate body; by what idea are its parts bound together in the unity of an organic whole; for similar language is applicable to any product of Art, or work of genius. Indeed, this definition does but cite an instance of that *UNITY* towards which the human intellect strives, in all things, and for ever: and of which, among written works, the poem is the most perfect attainment.

But, beyond and superior to all the forms of speech, and all devices of composition, there is that which the human mind recognizes and loves as poetry. In the Grecian Hexameter, the Horatian Lyric, the English Epic, and the rhymed sonnet, it is less the artificial form than some element of beauty which lies beyond the form and *deserves* it, that warrants the name of poetry, and secures the verdict of Time.

If it be said that poetry is beauty expressed in speech, it must be remarked that *beauty* is too large a word to be so limited. There is beauty, also, in history and eloquence (over both of which a Muse was accordingly placed by the beauty-loving Greeks), and yet neither of these is necessarily poetical.

Nor can we safely, as some would do, confine the word poetry to the language of passion. This is, indeed, partly in the right direction, for the *tender* passions, when roused to a certain degree of elevation, always express themselves poetically; but this is never true of the lower and coarser passions, unless they are excited in the service of some more elevated impulse or sentiment; while, on the other hand, there is much true poetry in which passion, properly speaking, is not present.

Following the spirit of this suggestion, we may, therefore, conclude that poetry is the natural utterance of the more elevated or tender sensibilities and sentiments of the mind. Whenever these impulses are awakened to such a degree that their influence becomes predominant in the soul, then the soul speaks in poetry; such poetry as it has genius for. These utterances are recognized as poetry without the aid of artificial form. The celebrated response of Ruth to her mother-in-law, is poetry—in all languages and in every age—and it was inspired by a gush of filial love. Literature, and indeed every man's experience, will supply examples in which love, pity, reverence, the sense of beauty or sublimity, and whatever other high or tender senti-

ment is in the heart of man, have uttered themselves in words which all men pronounce poetical without the embellishment of numbers.

But it is the constant instinct of the human mind to dignify and adorn these poetic utterances with "the accomplishment of verse." This is their natural and fit habiliment. Beautiful in their substance, they seek a form of corresponding beauty in which to embody themselves.

"So every spirit, as it is more pure
And hath in it the more of heavenly light,
So it the fairer bodie doth procure
To habit in; and it more fairly delight
With cheerful grace and amiable sight."

In process of time, however (as is wont to happen in human things), the *forms* which poetry has thus appropriated as its proper expression and embodiment, began to be palmed upon the world as poetry itself; or were stolen, like those "goodly names,"

"Which were the ancient heritage of virtue,"

and worn for their own purposes by impostors of every sort. These pretenders, besides their borrowed heraldry, usurped also the family name; and too easy a recognition of their claims has increased the difficulty of answering the question with which we began. In the verseless poetry of uncultivated nature, is clearly the same element which gives imperishable worth to the numbers of Homer, and the songs of Robert Burns; but what concord or affinity has it with those artificial products which have the form of poetry, but deny its spirit? These extremes have no common element; they are opposites; the one is poetry without form, the other is form without poetry,—and to include them in the terms of a definition is simply impossible.

Doubtless, there is no *truly* beautiful form of speech which does not veil and betray a beautiful sense. Imposture may go far; "cunning words" may imitate Beauty very nicely, they may deceive a single reader,—they may even delude a generation or two;—but they are sure in the end to be detected, and found to be but "sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal." So every experience serves at least to establish the declaration of "sage and serious" Spenser:—

"That all which *faire* is, is by nature good;
That is a sign to know the gentle blood."

S. M. C.

The following is a fragment of an essay left by Greenough, the late eminent sculptor, for which we are indebted to his brother, R. S. Greenough. We hope to give, by the same favor, other extracts from time to time.

THE Chinese make a plaything, which is really very curious to observe. It is a ball of ivory, so cunningly undercut that a second ball is cut quite clear inside of it, and moves easily as a shrunken kernel within a shell; this second ball is undercut in the like manner, and a third, fourth, fifth, etc., are wrought out till the number reaches to ten or twelve. I have often thought of these balls when I have seen in letters and in Arts what are called *tours de force*. The mechanical difficulty constitutes the sole source of interest. The achievement has no fruit or result, it is

alone and naked. The authors of the Laocoön fashioned that divine group, complicated as it is, with simpler means than are necessary to perfect one of these unmeaning toys. The Flemings devoted to the exact image of an oyster floating in its shell, or a wineglass twinkling in the light, more *apparent* delicacy of hand and eye than the Italians had, when they dared to draw the profile of Christ. Beato Angelico takes you to heaven with less drawing and color than those Dutchmen required to show you a butcher's shop with all the implements of the same. The real difficulty both in Art and letters seems to be not to do—but to know what to do, and where to stop. Michael Angelo has been spoken of as great, because he made the marble fly from his chisel with such impetuosity. All good and strong workmen can do this—his strength lay in knowing that the thickness of a wafer lay between his chisel and the skin of his Moses, and in exchanging that chisel for a file.

The English stood aghast when they came upon the Continent in '15, and found that the polished marbles of Canova, were less admired by the artists of Rome than the outlines of poor Flaxman, whom they had left at home, carving the sublime wig of Lord Mansfield for the Westminster Abbey.

But, if the mass seems, at first, so obtuse in matters of taste, they are the safest umpires on the whole—capable of being amused by trifles like children, like children they tire easily, they throw down the toy at last, and cry for bread.

I once had the honor of hearing a President of the United States talk of sculpture. He spoke of several works which he had seen, but declared that the statue of a royal Governor, still preserved somewhere in Virginia, was the only work that gave him a full idea of the power of the Art. "The wrinkles in the boots, sir, are perfection." Lest any man should suppose that either he or I were inclined to amuse ourselves, at the expense of sincerity and truth, I do declare that these were his words, and uttered with much warmth.

HORATIO GREENOUGH.

It is hard for a lover of the beautiful—not a mere lover, but a believer in its divinity also—to forgive the Puritans, or to think charitably of them. It is hard for him to keep Forefathers' Day, or to subscribe to the Plymouth Monument; hard to look fairly at what they did, with the memory of what they destroyed, rising up to choke thankfulness; for they were as one-sided and narrow-minded a set of men as ever lived, and saw one of Truth's faces only—the hard, stern, practical face, without loveliness, without beauty, and only half dear to God. The Puritan flew in the face of facts, not because he saw them and disliked them, but because he did not see them. He saw foolishness, lying, stealing, wordiness—the very mammon of unrighteousness rioting in the world and bearing sway—and he ran full tilt against the monster, hating it with a very mortal and mundane hatred, and anxious to see it bite the dust that his own horn might be exalted. It was in truth only another horn of the old dilemma—tossing and goring grace and beauty and all the loveliness of life, as if they were the enemies instead of the sure friends of God and man.—*Independent*.